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SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS MINORITY GROUPS FACE RED TAPE, NOT CLOSURE
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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Most of Tajikistan's previously registered religious groups and nearly all mosques completed mandatory re-registration with the Department of Religious Affairs (DRA) before their January 1, 2010 deadline. The Dushanbe synagogue was not able to re-register because of a land ownership issue. The DRA re-registered six of the Union of Evangelical Christian Baptists' (UECB) member churches, but not the Union itself. The Head of the DRA blamed his Department's failure to re-register these groups on bureaucratic snags, promised to help the Baptist and Jewish communities resolve their registration issues, and pledged that the government would not interfere with their activities in the meantime. On January 20, a Dushanbe court upheld a ruling that the activities of a separate Baptist congregation were illegal due to its refusal to apply for the mandatory registration. END SUMMARY

UECB: FREE TO WORSHIP, BUT RE-REGISTRATION OF UNION DENIED

¶2. (SBU) Pastor Andrew Werwai of the UECB said the DRA re-registered all six of the Union's previously registered individual churches, but expressed frustration with the government's decision to deny the UECB's application for re-registration as an umbrella Baptist organization in a meeting on February 1. Per the government's April 2009 Law on Religious Practices, all registered religious organizations were required to submit applications for re-registration to the Ministry of Culture's DRA by January 1, 2010 (Reftel A). Werwai said that he submitted the Union's application on December 18, 2009, after months of bureaucratic delays in dealing with the DRA. "We started the process in June, but had our papers sent back to us fifteen times with requests for more documents." The DRA told Werwai that it denied the UECB's application because it needed to submit documents a month in advance of the January deadline and that another Union that existed claimed the same name. (NOTE: There are several Tajik Baptist organizations with similar names. Post will seek to clarify this point as related to the UECB's registration application.)

¶3. (SBU) Eight additional Baptist church congregations are seeking to register, for the first time, under the UECB umbrella. For a local congregation to register as a religious organization, it must submit to the DRA, in addition to many other documents, a certificate from the local government administrator attesting that ten church members had been resident in the area for at least five years. Werwai said several local officials had not provided this required certificate. The Roghun Mayor reportedly told the local Baptist congregation that, because the UECB was now "illegal", their

activities too were illegal. He refused to provide them the local certificate until the DRA registered the UECB. The Roghun Mayor warned the Baptists, according to Werwai, that they could soon face the same kind of pressure that Baptists face in Uzbekistan if they are not careful. Most of the eight churches had not faced similar problems, beyond the standard red tape, and four already received the needed certificates.

¶4. (SBU) Government officials have not prevented any of the UECB's churches from worshipping. "For now, we don't want to create conflict with the government. We want to resolve it quietly. They haven't stopped us from meeting as we have for 80 years. If they make any attempts to interfere with our worship, or take our property, then we will be in front of the media." Werwai asked the Embassy to intervene quietly with the DRA to try to resolve the outstanding issues.

SYNAGOGUE: THE LAND PROBLEM THAT WON'T GO AWAY

¶5. (SBU) Dushanbe's only synagogue was not able to submit an application for re-registration because the land is still nominally owned by the president's brother-in-law, Hassan Asadullozoda, who donated the facilities to the Jewish community after the government bulldozed their former synagogue to build the "Palace of the Nation" (Reftel B). The Jewish community cannot apply for DRA registration until ownership of the synagogue is officially transferred to a Jewish community representative. As part of the registration process, religious organizations must present documentation that their place of worship is owned by a resident member of the group. Synagogue leader Mikhail Abdurahmonov told Emboff that the government has

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not prevented the synagogue from conducting its normal activities. A "sponsor" from the New York Bukharan Jewish community travels to Dushanbe in mid-February to meet with Asadullozoda and settle the registration issue. Abdurahmonov hoped that the synagogue would be able to register following the visit.

DEPARTMENT OF RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS: NOT OUR FAULT

¶6. (SBU) In a February 2 meeting with Emboff, DRA Head Idibek Ziyoyev said his department did everything it could to register Islamic and minority religious organizations before the January 1 deadline, completing re-registration of nearly all the countries 3,250 Friday and "five-time" praying mosques. He blamed the UECD for its failure to re-register, claiming that it submitted late documents and that there were different Baptist groups claiming the Union title. The Baptist Union and Jewish community would need to register as new organizations since they missed the deadline, but the government would not interfere with their worship or activities while they complete the process. The eight Baptist churches seeking new registration should have no problem getting the necessary documents from local officials.

As soon as they submitted their applications, the DRA would register them as religious organizations. The DRA would register the synagogue as soon as it settled the property issue.

¶7. (SBU) Several additional religious organizations that had previously been registered, including "International Wheel" and "Leakhona", did not submit re-registration applications. Ziyoyev said these and several other groups no longer existed in

Tajikistan. If they wished to register as new organizations, they could submit the required materials at any time. Officials have told the Jehovah's Witnesses that since they were banned by court order in 2008, they may not register (Reftel A).

¶ 18. (SBU) Emboff underlined the importance of religious freedom to the USG, explained that the UECD has a different understanding of circumstances regarding denial of its re-registration application, and noted the Embassy's concern about the Roghun official's comments to the local Baptist community. Emboff told Ziyoyev that the USG would appreciate the DRA's efforts to facilitate registration of the UECD, its eight affiliate churches, and the synagogue as soon as possible. Ziyoyev promised to meet with Pastor Werwai next week to discuss how to resolve the outstanding registration issues. He repeated that neither the synagogue nor the Baptists would face restrictions on their normal activities while completing the registration process.

RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS CHIEF: TEACH US ABOUT RELIGION!

¶ 19. (SBU) Ziyoyev raised the country's 2009 Law on Religious Practice and expressed confusion on why international observers criticized its restrictions on religious activity. "Don't religious organizations need to register in the United States?" Emboff explained that, among other differences, in U.S. law there were no restrictions on quantity or type of places of worship within a given population area or residency requirements for church founders. Ziyoyev explained that he was "not a religion expert by profession" and that his staff lacked any background in religious affairs because Tajik Universities lacked courses in religious studies. "It would be good to receive some kind of training on OSCE standards governing treatment of religious groups and how registration is conducted in different countries." Ziyoyev responded enthusiastically to a suggestion that the U.S. Embassy and the DRA organize a seminar on religious freedom and invite legal experts and representatives of Tajikistan's religious communities.

NON-REGISTERED BAPTIST GROUP BANNED, BUT NOT BOTHERED FOR NOW

¶ 10. (SBU) On January 20, a Dushanbe city court upheld an October 26, 2009 court decision declaring the activities of a non-registered Dushanbe Baptist Congregation illegal because it refused to submit an application for registration to the DRA

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(Reftel A). Congregation leader Andrei Chumachenko called the Embassy on January 21 to report the decision, but said that the congregation would continue to worship as before. As of February 3, the government has not prevented the congregation from conducting its normal activities.

¶ 11. COMMENT: The synagogue and UECB are caught in a web of post-Soviet bureaucracy, but for now the government, apart from the Roghun Administrator, is not using the registration procedures as a pretext to pressure the churches. Given the culture of corruption in the Tajik government, officials may view the synagogue's registration difficulties as a means to extort money from the synagogue's donors. Further, the fact that synagogue, or presumably any religious group, can not register without owning property raises another restriction on religious practice. Groups using rented or loaned facilities should be allowed to operate legally. The Embassy will follow

up with the DRA, the synagogue, and the Baptist groups and report on subsequent developments. The DRA Chief's admitted lack of knowledge of religious affairs is emblematic of the government's overall clumsy approach to managing religious communities, but his enthusiasm for a training session on religious freedom is promising. END COMMENT
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